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Tightened Rules Keep Nation's Secrets Too Long, Historians Say

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A curious spin of the wheel that brought President Reagan to power just as government archivists were starting to declassify foreign policy documents from the Cold War years in the early 1950s has led to a heated conflict between the administration and the nation's historians.

The scholars say thousands of documents, many more than 30 years old, are being held back by the government under stringent new declassification rules that demand excessive secrecy about long-past events.

Following the release of huge amounts of material dealing with World War II and its immediate aftermath, the historians now face a diminishing availability of documents from the 1950-1954 period and the increasingly tough criteria used to justify their retention as "classified information."

"Things have gradually got more and more conservative," said Anna Nelson of George Washington University. "With the Reagan administration, the release of documents has just closed up," complained Barry Rubin, another historian of U.S.-foreign relations.

Delays in declassification, the historians say, are making it "virtually impossible" to write American diplomatic history after 1950. The snail's pace of the process is also holding up State Department publication of the multi-volume Foreign Relations of the United States series, once admired as the finest work of its kind.

Current declassification policy is based on Reagan's Executive Order 12356 of August, 1982, drafted by an interagency intelligence community committee to provide what administration officials describe as "a framework for the executive branch's information security system."

The main difference between the Reagan order and its predecessors is not so much in its standards of secrecy as in the mechanics of declassification that it requires.

Reagan dropped the Carter administration requirement that all government agencies systematically review their own documents and said that only the National Archives—its budget and staff drastically reduced—need examine records deposited there.

A year later, many historians and archivists are dismayed. "We think the principle ought to be 'When in doubt, declassify,' " said Dr. Sam Gammon, executive director of the American Historical Association. "But now it is 'When in doubt, classify.' "

He added: "We're going to be fighting a rear-guard action. I think we all have the sense that we're growling and retreating."

Even under Carter, declassification was not all that rapid, the historians say. Although he stipulated review of government documents after 20 years, instead of 30 under President Nixon, a growing awareness of Cold War sensitivities combined with budgetary and manpower problems rendered the theoretically more liberal approach ineffective.

Reagan's order, according to Milton Gustafson, head of the diplomatic records branch at the National Archives, "confirmed the practice of the Carter order and eliminated some of the anomalies. Carter's was liberal in theory and conservative in practice. The Reagan order simply eliminated the liberal part."

The declassification process goes on every working day in the State Department's Classification/Declassification Center (CDC) to determine whether historical material can be deposited for public use in the National Archives.

There are 160 retired foreign service officers involved. Using a 6-inch-thick set of highly-detailed country-by-country guidelines, which themselves remain classified, these reviewers weed out the sensitive material from tons of innocuous documents, leaving behind a record which the scholars say is incomplete and possibly misleading.

The classification decisions are quite complicated. When a visitor came to the classification center earlier this year, one of the "annuitants" employed there was reviewing a telegram sent from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, Syria, to State on May 27, 1953, more than 30 years previously. He decided that it must remain secret because it contained "security/classified information."

"When you are an historian you recognize that one or two critical documents can completely change the nature of the story," said Betty Unterberger, a faculty member at Texas A&M University. "The public's right to know is being overshadowed by what bureaucrats say are security interests."

Control over declassification first began to tighten up under Carter in 1979, when the CDC was created within State's Bureau of Administration to centralize a process that had grown hugely because of requests for documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

Declassification was previously handled by the department's Office of the Historian in the Bureau of Public Affairs. The office was—and remains—responsible for publication of the Foreign Relations of the United States volumes, but it now depends on the CDC for authority to publish.

"The historian's office was perceived as too liberal, and the idea was to have a separate office to have responsibility for declassification," said Gustafson. "It was seen as an administrative problem rather than a public affairs matter."

William Z. Slany, the historian in the State Department office, makes the same point: "Historians obviously have a different view of documents from professional people whose concern is the effective application of regulations. We are moving toward different agendas. I regret that this office no longer has as much of a role as it used to."

And there is another problem: the very subject matter of American foreign relations in the aftermath of World War II.

"The world up to 1949 didn't have quite the same problems as afterward," said Edwin Thompson, director of the Archives' records declassification division.

"There was no NATO, no Iron Curtain, no East versus West, the whole deepening of the Cold War. And you didn't have Korea. Now much more detailed examination is necessary," he said.

Among the drafters of Reagan's executive order, said Slany, "there was a growing

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